

EDITH ECCLES (1910-1977)*

By Nicoletta Momigliano

ABSTRACT: Edith Eccles (1910-1977) was active in the Aegean in the 1930s. Her initial interest in Late Minoan seal-stones brought her to Crete, where she also worked with S. Marinatos, J.D.S. Pendlebury and R. W. Hutchinson. She directed the excavations at Ayio Gala on Chios in 1938. During the 2nd World War she worked as District officer for the UNRRA. Her promising archaeological career was brought to an end soon after the war by illness. She joined the Foreign Office in 1946, where she worked until her retirement in 1965.

Edith Eccles belonged to a group of remarkably enterprising women who worked in the orbit of the British School at Athens in the 1930s and included, to mention a few, Sylvia Benton, Winifred Lamb and Mercy Money-Coutts (Seiradaki). The first two represent a slightly older generation, while Mercy Money-Coutts was an exact contemporary of Eccles (both being born in 1910). Eccles' promising but short archaeological career was interrupted by the 2nd World War and brought to a premature end by the onset of multiple sclerosis.

She was born in Liverpool on 8 October 1910 in a relatively modest but comfortable family. Her father, James Eccles, was a bank clerk. At Liverpool she attended the Council School from 1916 to 1921, and the Queen Mary High School from 1921 to 1928. From 1928 to 1931 she studied at Royal Holloway College, London (partly funding her studies with a scholarship from the Holt Educational Trust), where her interest in Greek art and archaeology was sparked by the teaching of Bernard Ashmole. In 1931 she obtained a BA Hons. in Classics.¹ She then returned to study in her native Liverpool, where in 1933 she obtained a Certificate in Archaeology. Here she was taught History of Greek and Roman Art by John Percival Droop (1882-1963), the Professor of Classical Archaeology from 1920 to 1948, who had succeeded R.C. Bosanquet, the first holder of the chair.² She also studied under J. Garstang (Methods and Practice of Archaeology), T.E. Peet (Egyptian Art), H.A. Ormerod (Greek and Roman History) and attended courses in geology and surveying. During the academic year 1932-33, while studying for her Certificate, she worked as Librarian and Assistant Secretary to the Institute of Archaeology of Liverpool.³

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¹ Royal Holloway College, University of London: College Calendar 1962-63 (AR 243); Student Register 1921-1946 (AR 200/2); Eccles' Student Record Sheet (AR 201/4).

² C. Mee and J. Doole, *Aegean Antiquities on Merseyside* (Liverpool 1993), x.

Eccles was admitted as a student of the British School at Athens for the session 1933-34.⁴ Women had been admitted since the 1890s, but 'were not allowed to reside or to work on excavations', and it was only after the 1910s, at the insistence of Jane Harrison, that women became eligible for Studentships.⁵ This institutional attitude finds an excellent counterpart and illustration in the passage on women's participation in excavations quoted below. The passage was published as an epilogue to his *Archaeological Excavation* (Cambridge 1915, 63-4) by J.P. Droop, who had a long association with the British School at Athens and taught Eccles at Liverpool.

By way of epilogue I may perhaps venture a short word on the question much discussed in certain quarters, whether in the work of excavation it is a good thing to have co-operation between men and women. I have no intention of discussing whether or no women possess the qualities best suited for such work; opinions, I believe, vary on the point, but I have never seen a trained lady excavator at work, so that my view if expressed would be valueless. Of a mixed dig, however, I have seen something, and it is an experiment that I would be reluctant to try again; I would grant if need be that women are admirably fitted for the work, yet I would uphold that they should undertake it by themselves.

My reasons are two-fold and chiefly personal. In the first place there are the proprieties; I have never had a very reverent care for these abstractions, but I think it is not everywhere sufficiently realised that the proprieties that have to be considered are not only those that rule in England or America, but those of the lands where it is proposed to dig; the view to be considered is the view of the inhabitants, Greek, Turk, or Egyptian. My chief reasons, I said, were personal, but I hasten to add that they have nothing to do with the particular ladies with whom I was associated; should these lines meet their eyes I hope they will believe me when I say that before and after the excavations I thought them charming; during it however because they, or we, were in the wrong place their charm was not seen. My objection lies in this, that the work of an excavation on the dig and off it lays on those who share in it a bond of closer daily intercourse than is conceivable, except perhaps in the Navy where privacy is said to be unobtainable, except for a captain; with the right men that is one of the charms of the life, but between men and women, except in chance cases, I do not believe that such close and unavoidable companionship can ever be other than a source of irritation; at any rate I believe that, however it may affect women, the ordinary male at least cannot stand it. It is true that it might also be a source of matrimony, but as that would mean a temporary end to serious work of two members of the expedition, it can hardly be used as an argument for co-operation. Marriage apart, and I can imagine a man conducting a small excavation very happily with his wife, mixed digging I think means a loss of easiness in the

³ See Bryn Mawr College Archives (letter from Eccles of 20 March 1936).

⁴ Basic information on her archaeological activity while a student at the British School at Athens can be gathered from the *Annual Report of the Managing Committee* for the sessions 1933-34 to 1944-45.

⁵ Helen Waterhouse, *The British School at Athens: the First Hundred Years* (London 1986) 132 f.

atmosphere and consequent loss of efficiency. A minor, and yet to my mind weighty, objection lies in one particular form of constraint entailed by the presence of ladies, it must add to all the strains of an excavation, and they are many, the further strain of politeness and self-restraint in moments of stress, moments that will occur on the best regulated dig, when you want to say just what you think without translation, which before ladies, whatever their feelings about it, cannot be done.

One might like to think that the attitude expressed in this passage was not universal, but it is likely to have been fairly typical. At any rate, it provides a vivid illustration of an aspect of the environment in which women such as Sylvia Benton, Winifred Lamb and Edith Eccles were working.

Certain prejudices and habits die hard.⁶ It was the volatile political situation in Greece after the 1st World War, not a sudden change of attitude, which encouraged the admission of female students to the Hostel of the British School.⁷ But after the 1st World War the situation improved, also with regard to female participation in excavations, with a small but increasing number of women working on or indeed directing them (as shown by Sylvia Benton's and Winifred Lamb's careers).⁸

Students of the British School at Athens, besides attending to their general knowledge of Greek art and archaeology, were expected to conduct independent research on some special subject. Thus, in December 1933, at the suggestion of the then Director of the School, Humfry Payne, Eccles began to work on 'a general history of gems and seal-stones of the Late Minoan period, their antecedents and survivals'.⁹ This brought her to Crete, where 'she joined the famous 'Cretan' generation at the School'.¹⁰ Besides pursuing her own research on Minoan glyptic, she worked with John and Hilda Pendlebury and Mercy Money-Coutts at the reorganization of the Stratigraphical Museum at Knossos. The results were published in a number of small fascicles between 1933 and 1935 (see Bibliography). This is a most important and useful piece of work, which has enabled generations of scholars to find their way through more than 2000 boxes containing pottery and other finds from Evans' excavations. It is often referred to simply as

⁶ In 1986 I worked on a 'mixed' excavation in Crete (though *not* a British School excavation) where the (male) Director made no secret of his preference for all-male teams.

⁷ Waterhouse (*supra* n. 5), 132-135.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Letter from Eccles to the Dean of Graduate School of Bryn Mawr College of 20 March 1936.

¹⁰ L.H. Jeffery, obituary of Eccles in *British School At Athens: Annual Report of the Managing Committee for the Session 1976-77*, 18.

‘Pendlebury’s Guide to the Stratigraphical Museum’,¹¹ thus obscuring the fact that part of this work was based on that already done by Sir Arthur Evans’ assistant, Duncan Mackenzie, and that a substantial contribution was made by three women - Pendlebury’s wife Hilda, E. Eccles and M. Money-Coutts - and by one of Evans’ foremen, Emmanuel (Manolaki) Akoumianakis.

Eccles also joined the Pendleburys and Mercy Money-Coutts in explorations of the island in search of ancient sites (see Bibliography), and ‘used to say that she could never match their normal walking pace, which was even faster up mountains than on the flat’.¹² (John Pendlebury’s walking exploits in Crete are legendary.)¹³

In 1935, besides continuing her work on Minoan glyptic, she assisted R.W. Hutchinson (who had succeeded Pendlebury as Knossos Curator) in the excavation of the Villa Dionysos, and Spyridon Marinatos in his excavation of the Cave Sanctuary of Arkalochori, for which she was mentioned in one of Evans’ archaeological reports for *The Times*.¹⁴

In the autumn of 1935 she was awarded a post-graduate studentship by her undergraduate college, Royal Holloway, to study for an MA in Archaeology. She intended to use this opportunity to write up her work on Minoan glyptic and submit it as a thesis for the examination of MA in November 1936. However, as she herself explained, ‘In July 1935 ...the publication of the fourth volume of Sir Arthur Evans’ "Palace of Minos" made any further conspectus of Late Minoan gems superfluous and I therefore began to concentrate my attention on the gems of the period immediately succeeding Late Minoan times in the hope that I might be able to connect L.M. III gems with the so-called "Inselsteine".’¹⁵

Eccles had meticulously sketched, annotated, and obtained plaster impressions of many

¹¹ See, e.g., L.R. Palmer and J. Boardman, *On the Knossos Tablets* (Oxford 1963), part I, xiii; M.R. Popham, *The Destruction of the Palace at Knossos: Pottery of the Late Minoan IIIA period* (SIMA 12; Göteborg 1970), 14.

¹² Jeffery (supra n. 10).

¹³ See, e.g., Waterhouse (supra n. 5), 138-139.

¹⁴ 29 July 1935: ‘The highly successful explorations here carried out by the Ephor, Dr. Marinatos, have from the first been actively assisted by Miss Edith Eccles, of the British School at Athens’.

¹⁵ Letter from Eccles to the Dean of Graduate School of Bryn Mawr College of 20 March 1936. Despite the obvious setback to her own work, her relationship with Evans remained cordial, as shown by the only surviving letter from Eccles to Evans (dated 23 November 1935; Evans Archive, Ashmolean Museum Oxford). The letter mostly refers to a system of photographic magnification, which could help the study of Minoan glyptic.

seals and gems that she studied in European and Greek collections, but she never published the results of her research (even that on the period following Late Minoan). I am not competent to assess her work, or, rather, her potential work, on Minoan glyptic, but according to John Betts, to whom she generously gave her notebooks, it is regrettable that Evans' publication of *Palace of Minos* vol. IV discouraged her from writing a synthesis of her researches, for she had 'a more systematic approach and a better eye than he, as indicated by her correct condemnation of an obvious forgery that he was ready to accept as genuine ...'.¹⁶

Thus, in the summer of 1936 Eccles was again in Crete, working on sub-Minoan material from Knossos and helping R.W. Hutchinson with the publication of finds from excavations at Palaikastro and Praisos (see Bibliography). She also travelled in Chios with Mercy Money-Coutts looking for ancient sites.¹⁷

During the academic year 1936-37 she was awarded the Mary Paul Collins Scholarship in Archaeology at Bryn Mawr College, where she studied Greek archaeology, particularly the 'Dark Ages', under Mary Hamilton Swindler, Rhys Carpenter and Valentin Mueller. Her specific field of research was 'the gems and seal-stones of the period between Late Minoan and Geometric times'.¹⁸ L.H. Jeffery recorded that she always spoke of her year at Bryn Mawr 'as one of her happiest memories', and Eccles herself wrote to the President of Bryn Mawr 'I couldn't have been happier among the people with whom I worked ... I shall remember Bryn Mawr with great affection'.¹⁹ In 1938 Eccles sent a short account of her impressions of Bryn Mawr for the college records, which restates her warm feelings for the College and is particularly interesting for her remarks on the difference between American and English education:

¹⁶ Pers. comm. (letter of 5 January 1996); see also J.H. Betts, 'Some early forgeries: the San Giorgi Group', *Corpus der Minoischen und Mykenischen Siegel*, Beiheft 1 (Berlin 1981), 28-29, fig. 26. Eccles' collection of nine seals is in the Ashmolean Museum: see Betts, 'The "Jasper Lion Master": some principles of establishing LM/LH workshops and artists', *ibid.* 1 (acknowledgements), and 10-11. Her plaster impressions were donated to the Museum of the British School at Athens and a hand-list identifying them was prepared by John Betts. Some impressions of seals now lost have been published in *CMS* XI, 331-7 and *CMS* V Suppl. 1B, 194-5.

¹⁷ See M.S.F. Hood, *Excavations in Chios 1938-1955: Prehistoric Emporio and Ayio Gala* (BSA Suppl. Vol. 15; London 1981), 1, 11; D.W.S. Hunt, 'An Archaeological Survey of the Classical Antiquities of the Island of Chios carried out between the months of March and July 1938', *BSA* 41 9 (1940-45), 28 ff.

¹⁸ See Bryn Mawr College Archives (which included letters of references from J.P. Droop, Humfry Payne, Sir Arthur Evans, Spyridon Marinatos, and Bernard Ashmole, and the excellent reports on her work written by her teachers).

¹⁹ Jeffery (supra n. 10); letter from Eccles to M.E. Park of 9 June 1937.

I will admit at once that I came over expecting little of the States. Most of the Americans I had encountered in Europe had been Raymond-Whitcomb tourists, swarming noisily over Chartres or Olympia ... Academically, too, I was not expecting the standard to be so high. Brought up in the solid, slow English tradition, I had been taught, probably in so many words, that all American so-called "learning" was extremely superficial. (The idea is dying as we get to know you better, but it is dying hard.) At the British School in Athens I had shared with my colleagues their contempt for the childlike Americans across the road who needed spoon-feeding five days a week and seemed to have no idea how to research on their own ... From every point of view the reality far transcended my expectations ... And our work in the department was sheer joy ... I had never, of course, attended a seminar before. I had been brought up, as anyone in England is brought up, to work entirely on my own. This had been so even in my undergraduate days and all my graduate work had been independent of that of anyone else ... In Athens I had only the vaguest idea of the subject on which the student across the library table was working ... To have, then, ten people round a table all working on the same subject and all willing to pool their knowledge for the illumination of the rest, was something new to me. Yet ...this was the only way in which to tackle the subject we had been set. I had tried groping in this particular wilderness alone and I knew others who had tried. We had all failed. I had come over now to find a way through it, with others to hold my hand ...I can only hope that by the end of the year they had learned as much from me as I had from them.

Eccles was back in Greece in 1938, travelling in Crete and Turkey, and directing excavations of two prehistoric caves near the village of Ayio Gala on Chios, assisted by L.H. Jeffery and David Hunt.²⁰ It is possible that she was following the lead given by Winifred Lamb, who in 1934 had conducted excavations at the site of the temple of Apollo at Kato Phana - the first of a series of investigations on Chios made by the British School - and who, with her own work on Lesbos, Chios, and in Turkey, 'was in fact one of the first classical archaeologists after Hogarth and Garstang to seek light on the problems of Greek archaeology from Anatolia and this at a time when living and working in Turkey were hard and primitive, and particularly difficult for a woman'.²¹

At the time of Eccles' excavations, conditions on Chios, and at Ayio Gala in particular, must have been similarly 'hard and primitive'. As recorded by Hood, 'Car roads now connect Ayio Gala with Volissos to the south and Kardhamila to the east; but at the time that Miss Eccles visited it, the village was still extremely remote. It lies over a kilometre inland from a rocky and inhospitable stretch of coast, without harbours or landing places, and is therefore difficult of access from the sea. The journey from Kardhamila on foot in those days took some eight hours'.²²

²⁰ Hood (supra n. 17), xi.

²¹ Obituary of Lamb published in *The Times* of 18 September 1963. For work by the British School at Athens on Chios see Waterhouse (supra n. 5), 113-114.

²² Hood (supra n. 17), 11.

Moreover, digging in the caves proved rather dangerous because of the risk of the roof's collapsing.²³

As mentioned above, Eccles excavated two adjacent caves, upper and lower, near the village of Ayio Gala ('Sacred Milk'). The upper cave was entered from the chapel of Panayia Galactonosera, and she had to obtain permission from the ecclesiastical authorities.²⁴ Funds were provided by Dr. Philip Argenti and by Mr. Eumorfopoulos.²⁵ Eccles spent the winter of 1938-39 studying the finds from Ayio Gala both in Athens and in Chios. In Athens she was helped by Vronwy Hankey (née Fisher), who provided a delightful and amusing account of this experience, recalling Eccles' energetic character, her 'good, sharp sense of humour' (much needed in dealing with the shapeless, mud-like, undecorated Neolithic fragments) and her 'academic tyranny', through which she learnt 'the importance of enthusiasm for even the most dismal ceramic remains'.²⁶

Eccles travelled in Egypt, Syria, Turkey, and Cyprus during February and March, and returned to England in May 1939. A few months later, on 1 September, Hitler invaded Poland.

The Great War and illness (see below) prevented her from finishing the study and the publication of her excavations on Chios. In the 1950s Audrey Furness published some of the pottery from both caves, and Eccles invited Sinclair Hood to undertake the publication of her excavations, in connection with his own work on Chios.²⁷ The finds from Ayio Gala, mostly pottery, fall into two main chronological groups, Neolithic and beginning of Early Bronze Age, with little post-Bronze Age material, and provide important evidence for early links across the Aegean from Anatolia to Mainland Greece.²⁸

During the 2nd World War Eccles worked first in the Postal Censorship and afterwards for the BBC at Evesham (1939-42). She then served in the WAAF at RAF Medmenham from 1942 to 1944. In the summer of 1944 she was back in Crete with Mercy Money-Coutts, staying at the 'Taverna' at Knossos (British School at Athens), and working for the UNRRA until 1945: 'School members who were in Crete at the time ...have recalled how the two young women travelled round

²³ See Jeffery (supra n. 10).

²⁴ Hood (supra n. 17), 13.

²⁵ Hood (supra n. 17), xi.

²⁶ Vronwy Hankey (pers. comm., letter of 16 January 1996).

²⁷ Audrey Furness, 'Some Early Pottery of Samos, Kalimnos and Chios', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 22 (1956) 194-212; Hood (supra n. 17), xi.

²⁸ Furness (supra n. 27), 174; Hood (supra n. 17), ix, and 73-81.

the shattered villages with their loaded lorry, defying the orders of the British C.O. in the area.’²⁹

In 1945 she worked in Athens as an adviser to the Greek government on refugee problems. On her return to England in 1946 she was found to be suffering from multiple sclerosis. As stated in her obituary in *The Times* (30 June 1977), ‘for someone of her energy and intelligence it was a particularly cruel blow’. Her illness brought an end to her archaeological career, but in 1946 she joined the research department of the Foreign Office (Greek and Turkish section), where she worked until her retirement in 1965.

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‘The Seals and Sealings’, in R.W. Hutchinson et al., ‘Unpublished objects from Palaikastro and Praisos’, *BSA* 40 (1939-40), 43-49.

²⁹ Jeffery (supra n. 10).